

MINUTES
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Commission Conference Call Meeting
1420 East 6th Avenue – Helena Headquarters
Helena, MT 59620
DECEMBER 12, 2008

Commission Member Present: Steve Doherty, Chairman; Shane Colton, Vice-Chairman; Dan Vermillion; Willie Doll.

Fish, Wildlife & Parks Staff Present: Joe Maurier, Acting Director, and FWP staff.

Fish, Wildlife & Parks Staff Present via Telephone: Pat Flowers, FWP Region 3 Supervisor, Region 3 Staff; Summer Nelson, Montana Legal Council for Watershed; Becky Summerville, several members of the public. (See December 12, 2008 Commission file folder for those signed in.)

Topics of Discussion:

- 1. Opening – Call to Order**
- 2. Royal Teton Ranch Grazing Lease Acquisition – Final**

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1. Call to Order. Chairman Doherty called the conference call meeting to order at 4:00 p.m.

2. Royal Teton Ranch Grazing Lease Acquisition – Final. Commissioner Colton explained that a motion had been made at the December 11 Commission meeting to table any action on the RTR lease until a tour of the property had been conducted to allow Commissioner Doll the opportunity to see the area. Following said tour, the Commission was to reconvene via a conference call to make a decision on the acquisition. Today the Ranch escorted Commissioner Doll, Region 3 Supervisor Pat Flowers, RTR/CUT representatives, and some other interested parties on a tour of the ranch, so now a decision will be made. Colton expressed appreciation to the RTR folks for accommodating the Department on such short notice.

Commissioner Doll said they began the tour at the far end of the ranch adjacent to Yellowstone Park, and worked their way back down. They stopped several times, and he was afforded the opportunity to see what is there and what is available. He said it is unfortunate that one entity holds all the trump cards, but we must do what is best for the state.

Action: Vermillion moved and Doherty seconded the motion to authorize FWP to enter into an agreement to purchase the grazing rights from the Royal Teton Ranch for a 30-year period and commit \$300,000 of FWP funds towards that purchase.

Doherty said he, too, has toured the property with Region 3. In a perfect world it would be nice to have more, but this is a first step in helping the bison move out of Yellowstone Park. This is not the ending point in any discussions. He emphasized that bison are a wildlife species, and wildlife is what the Commission is charged with looking after.

Vermillion said this is a small step toward solving a vexing issue. Many people have worked hard on it. He hopes those folks who do not support this proposal can still find a way to back it.

Colton stated that it is also the Commission's role to approve the agreement and to approve FWP's contribution to that agreement. It has been worked on by a lot of people, however, it has not been directly touched by the Commission.

Pat Flowers, Region 3 Supervisor, stated as a point of clarification that the fence will entail seven miles.

Chairman Doherty asked for public comment.

Amy McNamara, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, thanked Commissioner Doll for touring the property. Bison must be viewed as wildlife, and steps need to be taken to care for them as such. This agreement is an important step. They are raising a million dollars toward bison management. She urged the Commission to support the motion.

Tim Stevens, National Parks Conservation Association, said his organization has 330,000 members with the mission of enhancing national parks. The eyes of the country are now on the Commission. They have committed to raising a million dollars for this agreement. This is a significant step, supported by a broad base of America.

Scott Bosse, Bozeman, said most of the places he hunts are around Yellowstone Park. FWP should do the same as they do for elk. It is expensive to purchase the grazing lease, but the present methods of handling bison are also expensive.

Carolyn Duckworth thanked FWP and strongly supports the proposal.

Scott Christenson, Bozeman, said it is a frustrating issue. There has been little progress, but this is a good step in the right direction. He urged the Commission to support the agreement.

Glenn Hockett, Gallatin Wildlife Association, said he is concerned with the process. He asked why there is such a rush - this could be better. He suggested sending the negotiators back to the table. He supports habitat for bison. He asked if this is Habitat Montana money. He said to slow down and get more public input for a better alternative.

Flowers replied that the preference is to use Sikes Act funding, however it is conceivable to use Habitat Montana funds if need be.

Joe Gutkoski, Yellowstone Buffalo Foundation, does not agree that this is a small step forward for bison. It diverts attention from a real solution. A total of 3 million dollars could better be spent on purchasing buffalo range. This does nothing toward accommodating buffalo in Montana. It gets the Governor off the hook for slaughtering buffalo. This plan falls short for what is needed for buffalo.

Liz Harrison, Bozeman, said this issue has gone on for a long time and this is a step forward. It is significant that people from all over the country have sent money to support this. She loves the bison, and is frustrated with the inability to solve the problem. She urged support for the RTR agreement.

Jeff Welsch, Belgrade, said it is a travesty that bison are confined to a national park. It is remarkable that in the huge state of Montana, there is no place for the bison.

Christi Weber, Bozeman, said it is important that this is approved. It is the right thing to do.

Molly Cross, Bozeman, said she wants her children to see bison roaming free. This is a small step forward. She supports the agreement.

Heidi Barrett, Livingston, urged the Commission to support the proposal, realizing it is not the end. It is one step until bigger and better ways are made possible.

Jim Bailey, Gallatin Wildlife Association, said the price is outrageous. Additional costs are not apparent, and there are other commitments over the next thirty years. It will not alleviate the need to slaughter bison. The Department of Livestock is contributing nothing. The IBMP failed, and it strengthens the attitude that bison will be managed as livestock. Other options are available.

Danielle Blank, Bozeman, supports the RTR agreement. It is important step forward.

Ken Sinay, Yellowstone Safari Company, said there will be a lot of work to do. This acquisition agreement should be applauded. The bureaucracies are working together. It will not make everyone happy, but it is a step in the right direction. It will have long-term ecosystem impacts. He encouraged support of the motion.

Julia Paige, Bear Creek Council, is in favor of the motion. She has seen what has happened to them before. It is a step in the right direction and will help the IBMP forward.

Cyndy Andrus, Bozeman, said she is a former park ranger, and she also instructed at the Yellowstone Institute. This is a great step forward. She strongly supports the motion.

Joyce Connors, Dillon, is concerned about bison going to slaughter. She urged the Commission to vote in favor of this motion.

Valerie Drake, Belgrade, said that in an ideal world this should have been settled in 1991. This is an opportunity to let some bison into the Yellowstone Valley and into some habitat. She said to make this work so more bison will have more opportunity. She urged taking this step.

Summer Nelson, Missoula, Montana Legal Council for Watershed, urged the Commission to withhold approval until there is a beneficial plan on RTR. This does not have enough options. She urged that other alternatives be sought. Comments that were sent to the Commission were not included in the decision. She appreciates that Commissioner Doll went on the tour.

Colton said he recognizes the concerns. When he first got on the Commission, his first tasks involved developing a bison hunt, and the goal was to treat the bison as a wildlife species. One thing they all asked was how to give the bison room to breathe. They need to be back on the landscape. His challenge is to look at the positive efforts, and not dwell on the negatives.

Chairman Doherty said he wants to see the bison managed as a wildlife species. They need more room to roam. This is not the last step – it is an important first step. Yes, it is a lot of money, but it will gain more room for the bison to roam.

Action on Motion: Motion carried.

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*Action: Doherty moved and Vermillion seconded the motion to adjourn the conference call meeting. Motion carried.*

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The meeting adjourned at 5:00 p.m.

Steve Doherty, Chairman

Joe Maurier, Acting Director